

What Really Matters for Struggling Readers

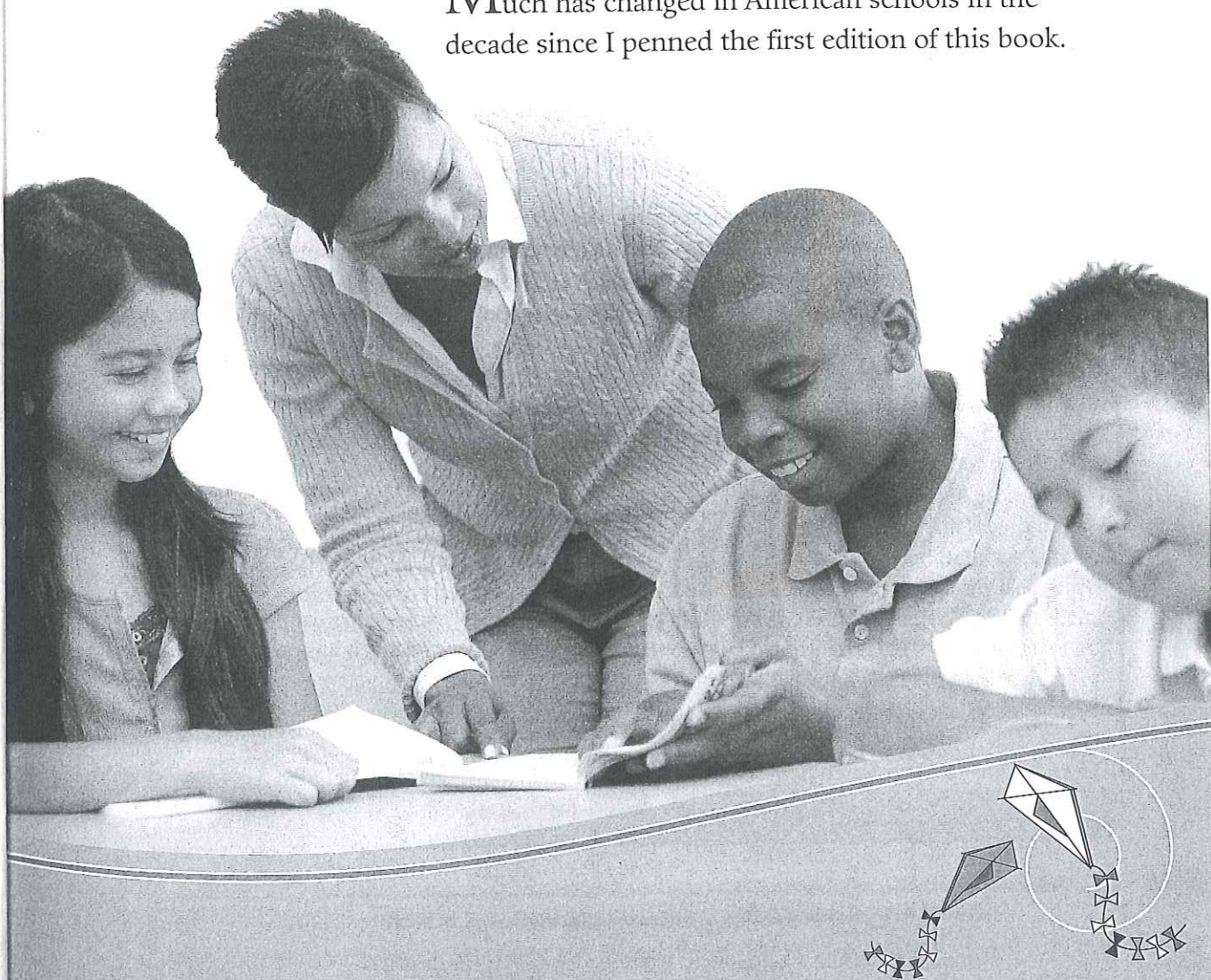
Allington, 2012



Chapter 1

Reading Achievement and Instruction in U.S. Schools

Much has changed in American schools in the decade since I penned the first edition of this book.



Most of that change was stimulated by the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001. We now know that the hundreds of millions of federal dollars spent under NCLB had one positive outcome: First-grade students from low-income homes enrolled in Reading First schools read nonsense syllables faster and more accurately than low-income first-graders in schools not benefiting from Reading First funding. In addition, children in Reading First schools received more minutes of reading instruction every day than the other poor kids and more of that reading instruction was focused on the five pillars of early reading instruction outlined in the report of the National Reading Panel. But, not surprisingly (from my point of view), at the end of first, second, and third grade there was no difference in

National Reading Panel

The National Reading Panel (NRP) was charged by Congress with recommending the scientific studies that were worthy of consideration in the design of reading instruction in the future. The NRP elected to examine only the experimental research studies in developing their report, a decision decried by many educational researchers. Based on their review of this body of research they concluded the following:

- Developing phonemic awareness and phonics skills in kindergarten and first grade was supported by the research but systematic phonics was not effective for struggling readers in grades 2 to 6.
- Providing regular guided oral reading with a focus on fluency was important.
- Silent reading was recommended for developing fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (though the panel felt that the research reviewed had not adequately demonstrated the benefits of various incentive programs for increasing reading volume).
- Direct teaching of comprehension strategies was recommended and it was noted that providing good comprehension strategy instruction is a complex instructional activity. Thus, the panel recommended extensive, formal preparation in comprehension strategies teaching for all teachers.
- Little research was available to support the use of technology (e.g., computers) in teaching reading, but the few studies available suggested that it was possible that there was a potential for some benefits to students.

For further information, see Allington, R. L. (2002). *Big Brother and the national reading curriculum*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Part of the reason for this has been alluded to previously. It is tremendously difficult and, typically, expensive, to design and carry out well-designed educational intervention research. Given how financial support for educational research has eroded over the past 30 years, few school districts or state education agencies or publishers actually fund any research on methods, materials, or programs. That said, no one should be surprised that far too many educational research projects cut corners (and costs) in ways that impact the quality of the results—at least in terms of the confidence we can place in the reliability and generalizability of the results.

In addition, every year more educational and psychological journals and magazines appear in the marketplace. These magazines need articles to fill their pages. Thus, the past 30 years have seen a veritable explosion of lower-quality research. Relatively few journals can be considered high-quality research publications where the peers doing the review are established and recognized educational researchers. Too many educational publications exhibit precisely the opposite attitude of that exhibited by the popular media. While the popular media seems to focus almost exclusively on “bad news” stories about education, educational magazines and journals focus primarily on “good news” stories. Think about the educational magazines and journals you read. How many articles in these publications reported on the failure of a reform or an intervention?

High-Quality Educational Research Journals

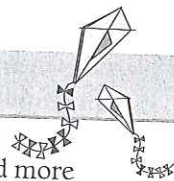
There are literally a hundred or more journals and magazines that publish educational research. However, there are but a handful of journals that require rigorous peer review. While no list can be comprehensive, below are my nominees for the journals most likely to publish high-quality studies or reviews of research:

Review of Educational Research
American Educational Research Journal
Journal of Educational Research
Journal of Educational Psychology

Journal of Literacy Research
Reading Research Quarterly
Elementary School Journal
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis

Two plain-language books that discuss U.S. educational achievement patterns in detail are Gerald Bracey's *Setting the Record Straight* (Heinemann) and Richard Rothstein's *The Way We Were?* (The Century Foundation). Both books cover broad academic achievement patterns for K–12 and include data on various other schooling issues such as flunking, teacher accountability, minority achievement, and so on.

Summary



It is important, I believe, that educators become better informed and more critical of claims of educational effects—positive or negative. As a profession we need to become more skillful at reading the promotional claims and the research assertions for educational interventions. I think we need to become more informed consumers of methods, materials, and programs. Claims of effectiveness have increased geometrically now that “research-based” instruction sits in the spotlight. But every claim needs to be examined with a skeptic’s eye while applying the general guidelines offered here.

Let me offer one example. Currently, many claims of effectiveness are being made for reading programs that include “decodable” texts (e.g., “Nan can fan the man”). The proponents suggest that it is a phonics emphasis with the accompanying use of “decodable” texts that make such programs effective. But, until recently, there has not been not a single study that systematically manipulated the use of decodable texts—texts where almost all the words are pronounceable given the letter-sound associations that have been taught—including studies examining the effectiveness of phonics programs (Allington & Woodside-Jiron, 1998). Claims about the utility of decodable texts are not supported by the research now available (Jenkins et al., 2004). But this lack of research has not inhibited proponents of a more code-emphasis—or phonics-emphasis—curriculum. Indeed, several states have now mandated the use of decodable texts and in each case assert, incorrectly, that their policies are “research-based.”

Likewise, the widely distributed booklet *Put Reading First* (Armbruster et al., 2001), along with the “scientific” entrepreneurial guidelines widely used to select reading programs for use in Reading First schools (Simmons & Kame’enui, 2002), both include decodable texts as one of several non-research-based criteria for identifying “scientific” curriculum materials. The fact that your federal government has promoted both of these guides is a cause for concern. If the federal education agencies cannot reliably report what the research actually says, given enormous resources, how can teachers be expected to accomplish this feat?

All of this may lead you to think that educational research is not going to be very helpful in designing higher-quality reading instruction.

But you would be wrong. We have learned an enormous amount about the characteristics of more effective reading instruction (Allington, 2009b; Pressley, 2006; Taylor et al., 2003, 2005). To use these findings, however, you have to move beyond the current fixation on methods, materials, and programs. When we ask about which method, material, or program is most effective, we ask a question that, literally, cannot be answered by referring to the research. As noted throughout this chapter, virtually every method, material, and program has accumulated some evidence that “it works!” But the evidence is often contradicted by other evidence.

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In designing more effective reading instruction, we will need to look to the research for larger issues than answers to questions about particular methods, materials, and programs. There seems a simple, but often overlooked reason for this. The search for any "one best way" to teach children is doomed to fail because it is a search for the impossible (Cunningham & Allington, 2011).

A simple principle—children differ—explains why there can be no one best method, material, or program. This simple principle has been reaffirmed so repeatedly in educational research that one would think most folks would have noticed it by now. In addition, anyone who grew up with siblings or who has more than one child of her or his own, knows from powerful experience that no two children are alike. Not even those from the same family gene pool. What, then, can you say about a classroom with 24 children from 48 sets of pooled genes?

A corollary principle—teachers differ—has been largely ignored as well, even though, again, we have lots of research evidence on the issue. In other words, no teachers are exactly the same. We've learned just how hard it is to get teachers to teach "against the grain"—to teach in ways that contradict their beliefs and understandings about teaching, learning, and reading and writing. If you want an intervention to fail, mandate its use with a school full of teachers who hate it, don't agree with it, and are not skilled (or planning to become skilled) in using it. This is what Linda Darling-Hammond (1990) has called "the power of the bottom over the top" in educational reform.

Additionally, if we are ever to create schools where all children are developing reading proficiency normally, we will need schools where every teacher believes that is possible and is committed to providing the types of individual instruction that some children need. I worry when I read a paper such as the one I recently read.

That paper (Scharlach, 2008) reported that two-thirds of the teachers studied did not believe they could teach all children to read. These teachers also provided instruction that was different from the one-third of the teachers who reported they could teach everyone to read. Basically, the teachers who felt they could not teach everyone to read set lower expectations and provided less and lower-quality reading lessons when compared to the teachers who believed they could teach all kids. Interestingly, teachers who felt they couldn't teach everyone to read cited various factors to explain their response. Those factors included low motivation of some children for reading, poor parental involvement, and the presence of learning disabilities, among other factors, for why they were not successful. The teachers who felt they could



The 100/100 Goal

Imagine that we could design schools where 100 percent of the students were involved in instruction appropriate to their needs 100 percent of the day. Imagine how different the achievement patterns of struggling readers might be. I will suggest that the 100/100 goal is, perhaps, the real solution for developing schools that better serve struggling readers.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics. *National assessment of educational progress*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov>.

teach everyone to read offered none of these factors as excuses. So, school faculties differ not just on how many expert teachers of reading are available but also on how many teachers believe they can be successful with every child.

In any school, then, you have a horde of students who differ in innumerable ways and a cluster of teachers who also differ in a myriad of ways. Expecting any single method, material, or program to work equally well with every kid in every classroom is nonsensical.

In the remainder of this book, I will address some of the lunacy of the current reading reform movement, especially the push to standardize reading instruction. Because federal legislation has set such a visible standard for using research to redesign reading instruction, I have attempted to develop a research-based argument for how we might best use what we have learned (from research) in the redesign of reading instruction in U.S. schools.

This book focuses on the converging evidence that is available on the features of reading instruction that really matter. I leave to others to debate particular methods, materials, and programs. In this book I develop a research-based framework for rethinking reading instruction generally, and particularly the reading instruction that we offer kids who struggle while learning to read.

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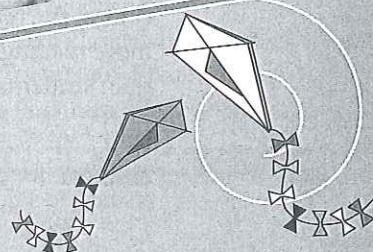
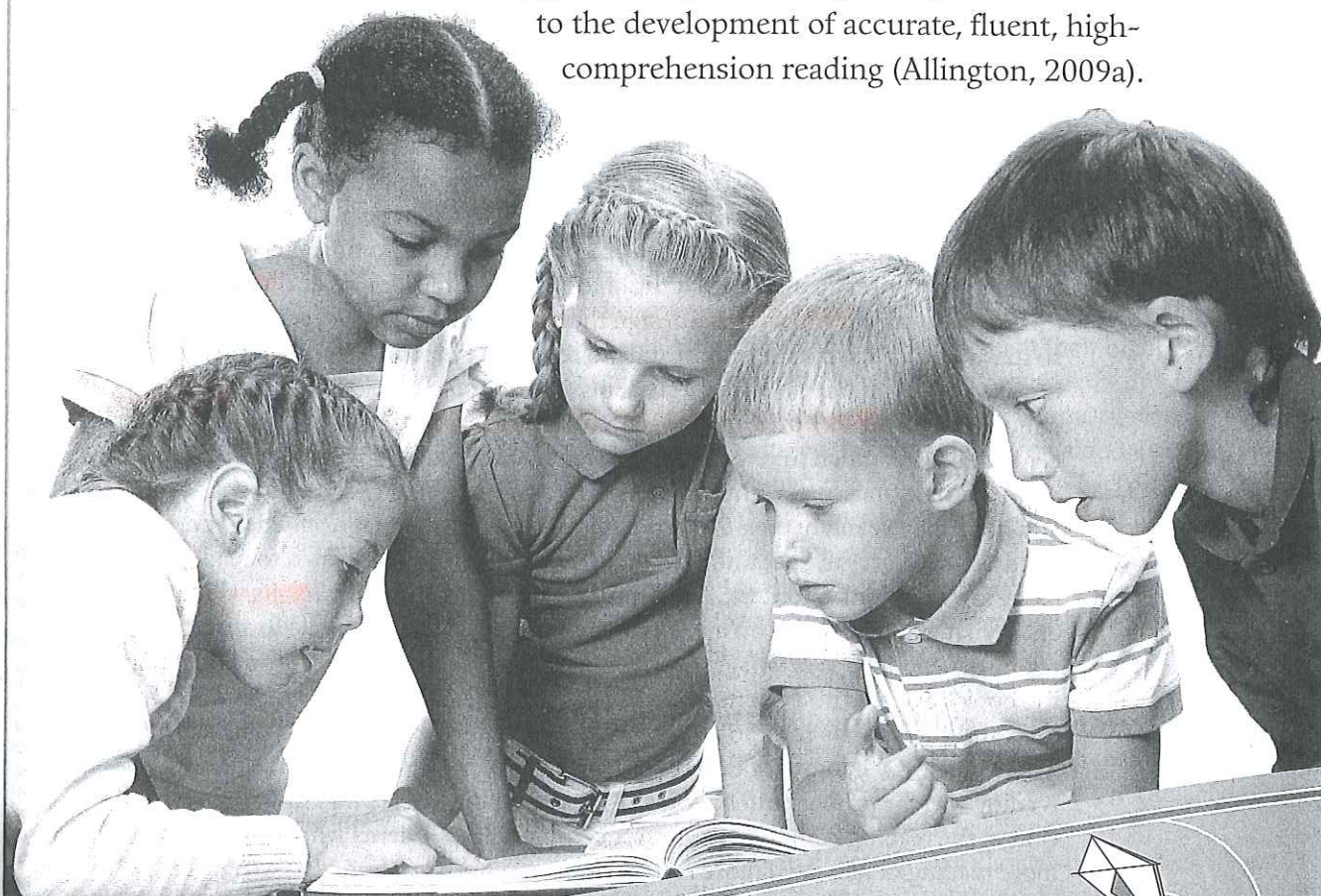
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Chapter 2

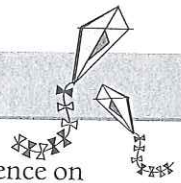
What Really Matters: Kids Need to Read a Lot

Everyone has heard the proverb “Practice makes perfect.” In learning to read it is true that reading practice—just reading—is a powerful contributor to the development of accurate, fluent, high-comprehension reading (Allington, 2009a).



spend the majority of time in those classes actually reading. It is simply too common to observe high school-level remediation or special education classes where students do virtually no reading but instead fill their class period working on worksheets or test preparation activities. Given that no research supports either workbook nor test preparation activity as a way to improve reading proficiency, it troubles me enormously that so many adolescents are wasting their time. Additionally, few middle or high schools provide sufficient reading that might lead to accelerated reading development. In other words, that ninth-grade struggling reader, the one reading at the fourth-grade level, will need reading lessons two hours daily for all four years of high school in order to have a chance at catching up with his grade-level peers.

Summary



Kids need to read a lot if they are to become good readers. The evidence on this point is overwhelming. To ensure that all students read a lot, schools need to develop standards for the expected volume of reading (and writing). The cornerstone of an effective school organizational plan is allocating sufficient time for lots of reading and writing. Some of the time needed can be reclaimed from noninstructional activities. But it is important that such a plan has the support of teachers. All teachers must understand the enormous benefits that enhancing the volume of reading will provide. In such a plan there would be **long blocks of uninterrupted time for reading and writing**. Teachers would have access to a large collection of appropriate reading material written at differing levels of complexity such that they would be able to match texts to student reading levels. **Reading and writing would be integrated across all subject areas and** a curriculum that featured wide reading and writing of informational texts as well as narratives would frame the lessons and activities. The plan would encompass grades K–12, not just the elementary grades. This wouldn't necessarily cost any more than we are currently spending but we would have to spend the money we have differently.

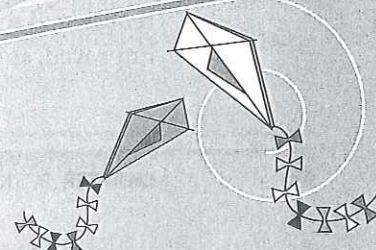
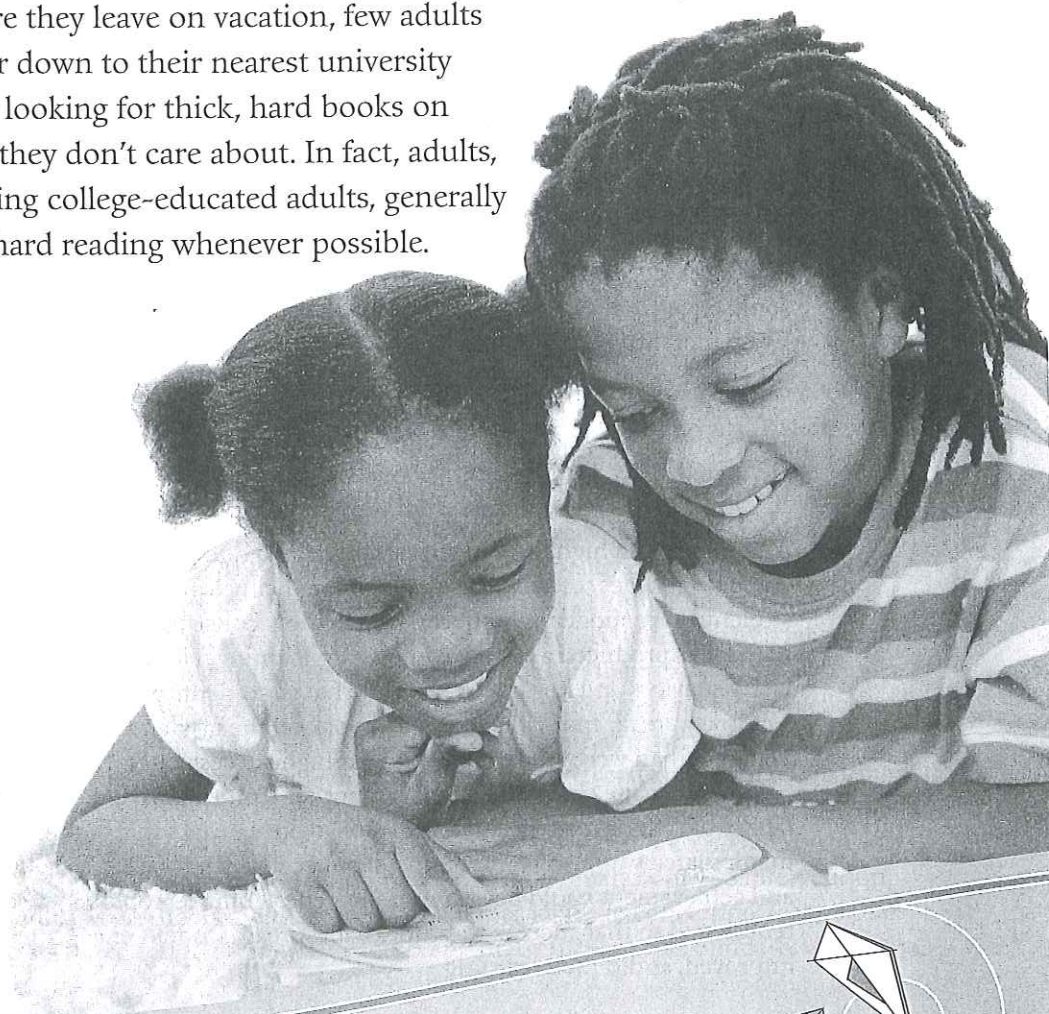
Reading is like other human proficiencies—**practice matters** (Allington, 2009a). Voluntary, engaged reading, in school and out, seems most powerfully linked to high levels of proficiency. Internally motivated reading activity, then, seems to have a stronger relationship to reading growth than volume of mandated, unengaged reading (Wang & Guthrie, 2004). This reading is a form of “deliberate practice” that scholars in various fields have linked to improved proficiencies. This research finding is important in considering how we might design reading lessons that enhance students' motivation in reading as we work to expand reading volume and improve reading proficiency.



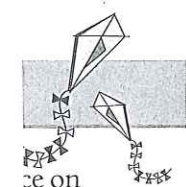
Chapter 3

Kids Need Books They Can Read

Before they leave on vacation, few adults wander down to their nearest university library looking for thick, hard books on topics they don't care about. In fact, adults, including college-educated adults, generally avoid hard reading whenever possible.



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This young man seems entranced by this book and it is just such entrancement that creates children who become life-long readers.

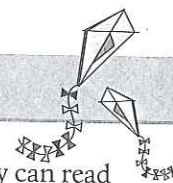
table there is a display of books by Jean George who will be featured next month in language arts in an author study. The children can select any of her books to read now to begin to develop a familiarity with her style, her craft, her works, but many more of her titles will be added to the display in a few weeks.

On the teacher's desk is a small stack of books that she will "bless" today (Gambrell & Marinak, 1997). These blessings are blessedly brief, just a few seconds each: The teacher holds up the book and mentions the title and offers a few words of information or response to the book and then moves on to another. She may mention that the book offers information on a topic they will be studying or was written by an author they know; or she may simply say something like, "If you like scary books/funny books/sports stories this book may be for you." For some books she may read just a bit of it, others may have the illustrations exhibited. The goal here is to offer children a quick introduction—something to entice them to read these books. So each day, each teacher selects 5 to 10 books from the milieu to feature. This helps ensure that children notice the range of

books available, it works to entice the child who would not search the collection very long for a book to read, or at least wouldn't when he began the school year.

Summary

Kids not only need to read a lot but they also need many books they can read accurately, fluently, and with comprehension right at their fingertips. They also need access to books that entice them to read. Schools can foster wider reading by creating school and classroom collections that provide a rich and wide array of appropriate books and magazines and by providing time every day for children to



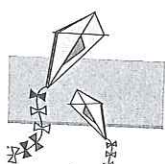
In many schools there is money to purchase test preparation books for every student, even though the research suggests little, if any, benefit for test preparation activity (Guthrie, 2002). In fact, test preparation beyond a couple of short sessions to familiarize students with the test format often seems to have more negative effects on achievement than positive. This happens because test performance is largely determined by two factors: reading ability and general world knowledge. Few test preparation packages offer much in the way of explicit reading instruction and even fewer provide opportunities to expand a student's knowledge of the world or of core curriculum knowledge (e.g., science or social studies).

Schools spend substantial funds on workbooks and photocopying of worksheets, but research suggests that such expenditures are not connected to improved achievement. In one high-poverty Alabama school I visited, teachers were given no workbooks, no test preparation materials, and only two reams of paper for photocopying. Any additional photocopying had to be paid for by the teacher. The principal asked me, "Why would I provide all those things [workbooks, test preparation, photocopying] when research does not support their use? Why would I make teachers pay out of their own pockets for the books they need to teach the students that are assigned them? Instead, I take the money that many schools allocate to things we know don't improve achievement and allocate that money to teachers for purchasing the books they need to teach every child well." If only all principals had such a clear view of what really matters.

All too frequently I enter schools where I find it hard to imagine that any but the most determined child will ever learn to read, given the mindless decisions the adults have made about spending the money available. Two decades of research on effective classroom and schools documents that schools without rich supplies of engaging, accessible, appropriate books are not schools that are likely to teach many children to read at all, much less develop thoughtful, eager, engaged readers.

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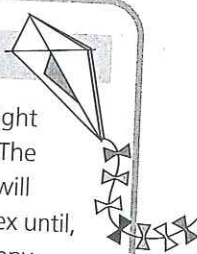
actually sit and read. They can make it easy for children to take books home for the evening or weekend by worrying less about losing books to children and more about losing children to illiteracy.

The emphasis must first be on ensuring abundant reading opportunities during the school day. We also need to create school literacy programs and environments that entice children and adolescents to take our books home to read on their own time.

I must admit that when I walk into a lower-achieving school and see a library with few books and student access restricted to a single weekly visit and I see classrooms with few books and no book displays, I am dismayed. When I see remedial rooms and special education rooms filled with workbooks and with computers that offer electronic workbooks, I cringe. When I see little time allocated for just reading but find a mandate that parents read with their children every evening, I get angry over such "blame the victim" policies.

In these situations I wonder just how the folks who run this school got so far off track. How is it that in such schools there is money for paraprofessionals in every classroom, for a home-school coordinator, for an assistant principal, for a social worker, for a gifted coordinator, for an in-school suspension supervisor, and so on, but no damn money for books?

Reading Ladders



Teri Lesesne (2010) uses the term "reading ladders" to describe just how we might move adolescents from reading simpler to reading more complex literary texts. The bottom rung of the ladder is a text that every student in the class can read and will read without much prodding. The later texts become progressively more complex until, at the top of the ladder, we find the much admired but complex texts that so many English teachers adore. Below is one example of reading ladder; Lesesne's book has many more. Remember the less complicated texts are at the bottom of the ladder.

The Boy Who Dared. Bartoletti, 2008.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas. Boyne, 2006.

Bridge to Terabithia. Paterson, 2007.

Walk Two Moons. Creech, 1994.

Olive's Ocean. Henkes, 2003.

The Savage. Almond, 2008.

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Chapter 4

Kids Need to Learn to Read Fluently

Several observable behaviors accompany difficult reading. One of the most obvious is a slowing of reading rate, which is often accompanied by finger pointing, even in adults. Phrasing and intonation also frequently break down, and rereading a passage or a segment of a passage is another signal.



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snooty, others a bit shy. In another California fifth-grade classroom, three students took on the roles of key characters in *Island of Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell). The young man playing the role of the dog even growled as he responded to queries from the teacher/hostess and the remaining students/audience!

The Puppet Show The use of puppet shows also provides an alternative performance activity to foster fluency and interpretation. Students create simple puppets, sock puppets, string puppets, stick puppets, and so on, and from behind a screen introduce a character through the puppet. In one classroom, students created puppets representing the historical characters whose biographies they had read. Each prepared a three-minute performance taking the role of their character and presenting a first-person narrative that they had composed.

Summary

Fluent reading is an important milestone in reading development. Some students struggle mightily and slowly improve their reading scores but never seem to achieve fluency. These struggling readers frequently lag behind their peers and are often children who read only when we request them to. In other words, they rarely engage in voluntary reading, perhaps because word-by-word reading just does not provide any personal fulfillment. Perhaps they have had only the rare opportunity to read texts of an appropriate level of complexity and so comprehension has rarely been strong. Given the demonstrated links between fluency and comprehension, it isn't particularly surprising that many word-by-word readers choose not to read much. When reading generates little or no comprehension, why would anyone continue to read except to comply with a teacher (or parent) request? But children who do not read voluntarily stand little chance of ever engaging in enough reading to become proficient readers.

The good news is that there are a substantial number of rigorously designed research studies demonstrating (1) that fluency can be developed, most readily through a variety of techniques that involve expanding the reading of texts; and (2) that fostering fluency has reliable positive impacts on comprehension performance. Thus, when fluency is an instructional goal, and it should be for struggling readers, we have a wealth of research to guide our instructional planning. Central to virtually all research demonstrating improved fluency has been expanding the amount of reading that struggling readers do. Expanding the amount of reading children do and focusing our instruction on developing each reader's self-monitoring proficiency fosters the development of a basic strategy that all readers must acquire, but there are other important proficiencies for which fluent reading seems necessary.

For instance, fluency is important in the development of higher-order literacy proficiencies. This is because engaging in these sorts of thinking about texts, ideas, characters, and themes would seem to require substantial mental activity space. Such demonstrations of higher-order literacy are more likely if the material was read accurately, fluently, and with reasonable recall of text content. In such situations, the reader would have the basic building blocks of thoughtful literacy, but when a reader struggles with word-by-word reading, having difficulty reading the sentences in phrases, it isn't surprising that little in the way of higher-order literacy is evident. So much cognitive effort was deployed at the word and sentence level that little remained for thinking about the ideas, emotions, and images found in the text. Working to develop fluent reading is important for fostering more thoughtful literacy performances.

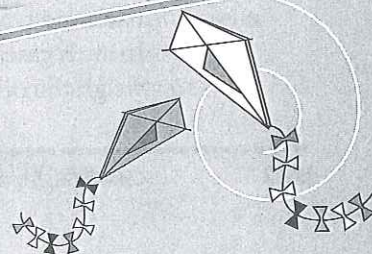
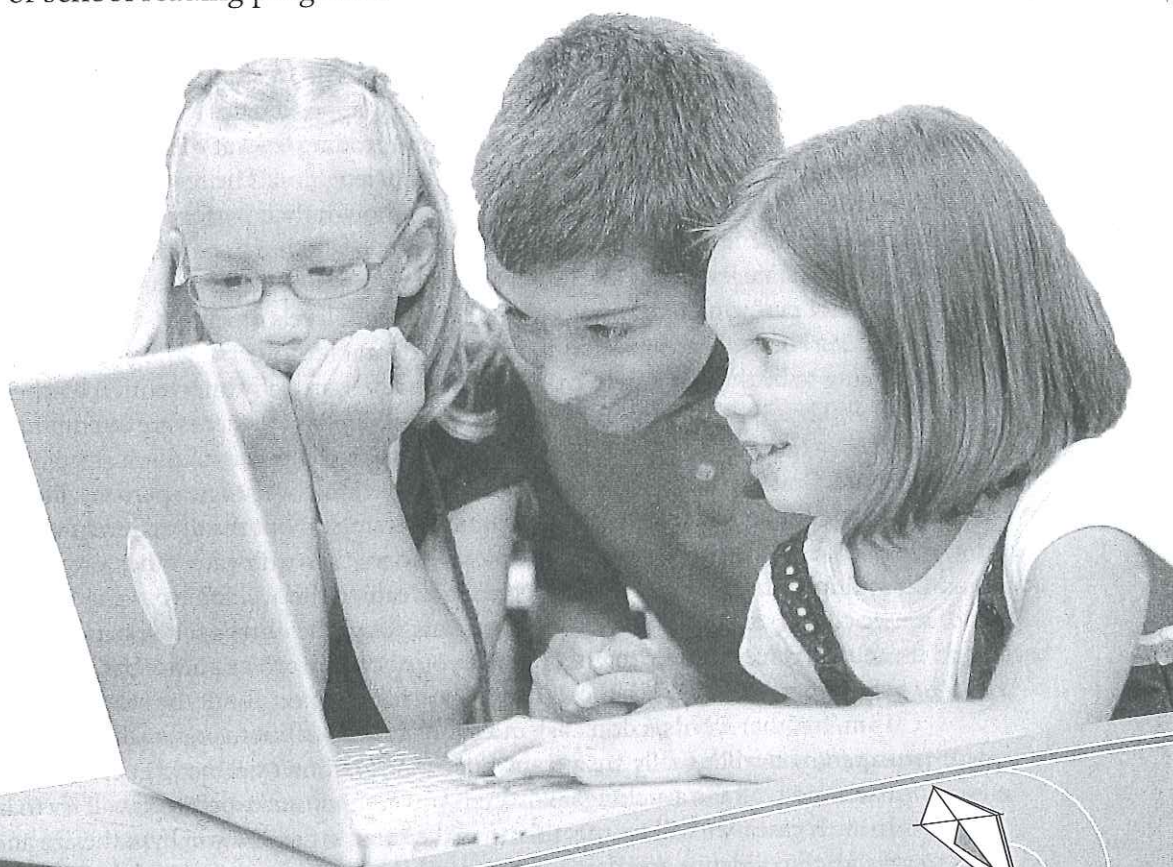
Finally, one largely unanswered question is whether the observed effects on fluency were simply the result of engaging in a lot more reading activity. As Kuhn and Stahl (2003) note, few of the repeated reading studies controlled for reading volume. Furthermore, in one study that did have the control group engage in extended independent reading while the experimental group engaged in repeated reading for the same amount of time, the researchers found comparable gains in both groups (Rashotte & Torgeson, 1985). In a series of studies that compared wide independent reading with repeated reading (Kuhn, 2005; Kuhn et al., 2006), both groups made similar gains in fluency and word reading, but only the wide reading group improved in comprehension. I will suggest that repeated reading and other fluency-supportive activities can be useful, but should be considered largely short-term interventions with the goal of moving the struggling reader quickly to extended independent reading activities. In other words, once you get the instructional environment well-designed you should expect that fostering fluent reading would be a task that took a few weeks, not all year long. But if we fail to get the instructional environment just right, we may find that students still have not become fluent readers after months of work. So, work on fostering fluency by ensuring that struggling readers have books they can read accurately, engage them in a little repeated reading, and guarantee that you have expanded the amount of high-success reading activity they do every day.



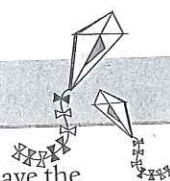
Chapter 5

Students Need to Develop Thoughtful Literacy

The new national standards for proficient reading have targeted a more thoughtful literacy than has traditionally been expected of school reading programs.

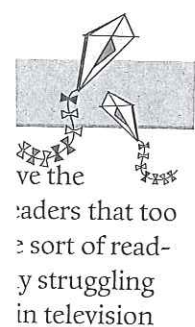


Summary



Let me close this chapter by simply noting that struggling readers have the greatest needs for lessons that foster thoughtful reading. It is these readers that too often are “flatliners” when it comes to reading. If we could elicit some sort of read-out of mental activity during reading, I fear that the readouts for many struggling readers would too often look like the flat EKG line so often depicted in television death scenes.

Kids need to read a lot to become proficient readers. They need books in their hands that they can read accurately and fluently and that are of interest to them. Once we have met all these conditions, we must help all readers become more thoughtfully literate. Some will need extensive assistance in this regard, in some cases because they are exposed to little thoughtful literacy at home. These are the children who depend on good instruction the most. However, all children benefit from good instruction—lessons that provide the sorts of demonstrations and supports that I have tried to describe in this chapter. For too long we have relied on the assign-and-assess lessons and provided too little useful strategy teaching and offered too few opportunities to engage in and develop literate talk. Changing in-school reading environments so that thoughtful literacy is fostered is one of the things that really matters for struggling readers.



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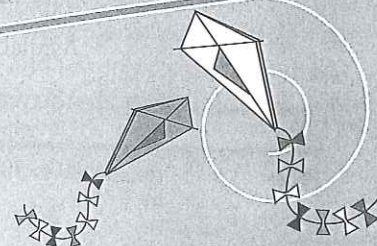
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Chapter 6

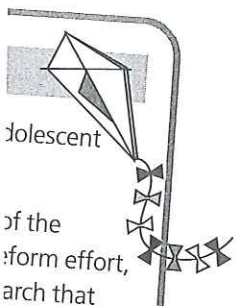
Where to Begin: Instruction for Struggling Readers

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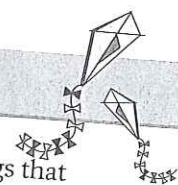
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science. Of course, if the basic problem is that the earth science teacher selected a textbook that many students cannot read due to their current level of literacy development, then tutoring is not the most direct solution to the problem that such decisions create (Allington, 2002a). However, it is unlikely that many reading specialists or special education teachers have much expertise in locating alternative, appropriately difficult earth science texts. But, again, the point is that not all students will grasp basic earth science concepts and understandings with any single set of lessons—some will get it; some won't. Typically, failure to get it from the standard lesson offered has meant simply that the student failed. However, now that high schools in some states are being graded based on the number of students who pass the earth science test, there seems to be more interest in attempting to develop interventions that increase the number of passing students (or increasing the number of students who know the basics of earth science).

Thus, I see a need for middle schools and high schools to develop a second support strand: content mastery programs. Such programs might operate during the school day or in after-school programs or as summer school programs (although the latter seem the most expensive and least effective option). In the high school my children attended (rated as one of the 100 best high schools in the nation by *Newsweek*), there has been an end-of-day "open" period for at least a decade. Every teacher is available every other day for small group reteaching, review, or remediation during this period. Sports teams do not begin practices until after this period. Buses do not depart until after this period is completed. Students can use the period as a study hall, for library work, or for a "second-shot follow-up" in any class they might be having difficulty in. This practice, in one of the nation's highest-achieving schools, may offer some insight as to *why* it is one of the highest-achieving schools.

Summary

Throughout this book I have focused on what I see as the few things that really matter for struggling readers. These few things are, I believe, as applicable to interventions targeted to adolescent populations as to elementary students. The 100/100 goal is appropriate for a K-12 system and not just applicable to a K-5 (or a K-3) school. We need to think long and hard about how to redesign elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools so that all students are engaged in appropriate instruction all day long. At the upper levels the programs are necessarily focused and structured differently from those targeting early grades intervention. But schools (and states) have often neglected to plan for interventions much beyond the early grades.





Learning from Studies of Exemplary Elementary Reading Instruction

Perhaps the best evidence available on just what high-performing classrooms might look like comes from the series of studies conducted at the National Center for English Learning and Achievement (CELA; go to <http://cela.albany.edu> for additional articles on these studies). These studies observed some of the nation's best teachers in a number of states (California, Florida, New Hampshire, New York, Texas, Wisconsin). Primary, intermediate, middle, and high school teachers provided a clear view of how classrooms might be organized to generate high levels of learning. In an article that appeared in *Phi Delta Kappan*, I attempted to summarize six key features of these classrooms (Allington, 2002d). I organized that summary around what I dubbed The Six T's of Effective Teaching.

1. **Time.** Effective teachers have students do more guided reading, more independent reading, and more reading in social studies and science. In many exemplary classrooms, children are reading and writing for half the day! "Stuff" does not dominate instructional time. (Stuff includes test-preparation worksheets, copying definitions, and after-reading comprehension worksheets.)
2. **Texts.** Students have books they can actually read with a high level of accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. All students, then, rarely have the same book. Students engage in enormous quantities of successful reading and become independent, proficient readers. Motivation for reading is dramatically influenced by reading success.
3. **Teaching.** Effective teachers don't simply "assign and assess"; they are involved in active instruction. Explicit demonstrations of cognitive strategies are modeled; instruction is offered in a balance of side-by-side lessons, small group lessons, and whole group lessons, but whole group lessons are brief and focused.
4. **Talk.** There's more of it, and it's more conversational than interrogational. Discussion is purposeful and personalized, not scripted or packaged. Thoughtful classroom talk focuses on making children's thinking visible and building understanding.
5. **Tasks.** Leaving behind low-level worksheet tasks, effective teachers demonstrate greater use of longer assignments, tasks that integrate several content areas, and substantive work with more complexity. Exemplary teachers provide students similar but different tasks.

As of this writing, some 25 states have implemented some form of high school exit examination. Other states and districts have begun holding eighth-grade students back unless they can demonstrate on-level reading achievement, or close to it. Our national high school graduation rate hovers around 75 percent, and most of those who now drop out typically have underdeveloped reading proficiencies. Mandating reading tests and setting passing test scores is not enough. We should expect some students to struggle with reading throughout their school careers. We must plan instructional programs that continue to provide targeted reading interventions for students through twelfth grade. An emphasis on early intervention is important, but no study has ever found early intervention alone to be sufficient.

There seems to be an emerging interest in extending reading instruction, both developmental and remedial, into high school. Federal legislation providing financial support for such efforts is currently pending in Congress. The International Reading Association has an adolescent literacy task force (www.reading.org) that has offered a number of recommendations for schools, universities, and policy makers.

By twelfth grade, economically disadvantaged students read about as well as non-poor eighth-grade students (NCES, 2009). But also by twelfth grade, many of the lowest-achieving readers have dropped out so the situation may actually be worse. This four-year gap began as a much smaller gap at fourth grade and widened steadily across the middle and high school grades. We can do better—we must.

6. *Testing.* Student work is evaluated based on effort and improvement. Rubrics shift responsibility for improvement to the students, so “luck” doesn’t play a part. Most effective teachers use almost no test-preparation materials, believing that good instruction is what makes the difference when it comes to test performance.

However, summaries such as these always leave me worried that we “dumb down” the complex expert activity of effective teaching whenever we reduce it to a few key features. For instance, my colleagues on these studies have since extended our initial findings in several important ways. Peter Johnston (2004) has written a small book about the language of these classrooms. In my summary, I simply noted that the classrooms were more conversational. Peter goes well beyond this by showing the many ways that teacher language impels or impedes student success and their orientation to the act of reading. Michael Pressley and colleagues (2003) focused their attention on the motivational aspects of these classrooms, showing just how powerfully positive and supportive these teachers were. Their work goes well beyond simply responding to children positively and providing choices. Judith Langer (2003) noted the importance of collegial and organizational support in the high-productivity secondary school classrooms she documented. Her work shows just how hard it is to achieve effective teaching without support.

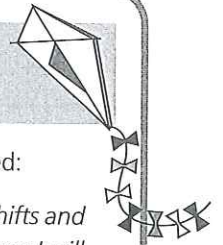
Beyond the work completed at CELA, there are the studies completed by Barbara Taylor and David Pearson and their colleagues at the Center for Improving Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). Their work adds additional evidence on the nature of high-quality classrooms and high-quality schools (Taylor et al., 2000b, 2003), as does the work of John Guthrie and colleagues at the University of Maryland (Croninger & Valli, 2009; Guthrie et al., 2000; Guthrie & Knowles, 2001; Guthrie et al., 2001).

By my count, these three research centers have so far produced at least 10 books and 40 articles reporting their findings. Thus, there is no shortage of information on what we might be doing to improve schools for poor children and for struggling readers. These studies have been cited throughout this book, but I believe that reading the original reports will be useful even for those who have nearly finished this book.

I think the following quotation from the *Phi Delta Kappan* article largely summarizes what each of these research teams have found: “In the end it will become clearer that there are no ‘proven programs,’ just schools in which we find more expert teachers—teachers who need no script to tell them what to do. . . . Are we creating schools in which every year every teacher becomes more expert?” (Allington, 2002d, p. 747).

I wish I could tell you that the ideas and strategies discussed in this book will turn the tide and that then all will be well in America. They won’t, but I do hope

Research-Based Advice versus Commercial Advocacy and Advertising



Jere Brophy (2000), award-winning researcher and classroom scholar, has noted:

Teachers are rightly confused and irritated by the seemingly continuous shifts and contradictions in the advice directed at them by supposed experts. However, I will submit that the problem is not being caused by researchers. . . . Researchers stay close to their data and make careful, qualified statements about implications. The kinds of overblown, polarized, and evangelical statements that cause most of the problems are coming not from researchers but from people whose policy advocacy is based on strong theoretical biases and who typically have something to sell but little or no scientific support for their claims and recommendations. (p. 177)

that they will help set us on a course more likely to lead us where we need to go. In fact, if I wasn't confident that the evidence on high-achieving schools and classrooms now available pointed to these ideas and strategies as reasonable directions for our work, I wouldn't have bothered to write this book.

For those readers hoping for a step-by-step manual for school reform, I'm sorry to have disappointed you. My basic goal has been to push all of us toward thinking more about those things that a century's worth of research and experimentation have indicated are the best bets for helping us create those schools we do not have. Developing the instructional expertise of every teacher, reorganizing schools so that supporting teacher development is, as they say, Job Number One, is the only strategy that I can endorse with any enthusiasm and the only one in which I can find substantial research support.

For those who hoped for more advice on early intervention (preschool through first grade) I have suggested a number of other available resources throughout this book. As I noted in the Preface, the emphasis on early intervention has generated a plethora of books, materials, and programs from which to review and draw ideas. I will humbly suggest that the key principles set out in this book are also critically important in early literacy instruction. But it is in grade 2 and beyond that has been much neglected in the advice offered for improving literacy proficiency. Thus, it is those grades that have been my focus in this book. As governors, presidents, and politicians, generally, have begun to recommend after-school and summer school programs as one way to meet the challenge of struggling readers, research and

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demonstration efforts have lagged behind. And so, I have attempted to summarize what we know about effective reading instructional designs in the hopes that students will spend this extra instructional time profitably. For those readers who wish more detail on earliest literacy instruction, I recommend both *Phonics They Use* by Patricia Cunningham (2008) and *Kindergarten Literacy* by Anne McGill-Franzen (2006).

I will close by reiterating the advice that Pat Cunningham and I offered in *Schools That Work* (one of the several books in this series): Think long and move slowly but always move forward. By this, I mean think about what you want to see happening in your school three to five years from now and begin working to get there. Change is hard. Change is anxiety provoking and necessarily slow. My own experience suggests that when we try to change everything at once, little that matters actually changes. But someone has to initiate and support the needed change. If not you, who? If not today, when?

Finally, remember that in the end it will still be teachers who make the difference in children's school lives. It is teachers who will either lead the change or resist and stymie it. **The focus of school change has to be on supporting teachers in their efforts to become more expert and reorganizing all the aspects of the educational system so that they can teach as expertly as they know how.** But bureaucracies rarely give up power easily and they rarely seem to improve people. In my most optimistic moments, I believe that people can change bureaucracies in positive ways. I hope that this book provides some of you with the confidence necessary to challenge bureaucratic nonsense when it arrives at your doorstep. No one knows your students as well as you do and no one knows their needs better. In the end, it is unlikely that anyone else in the bureaucracy cares more about your students than you. So fight for them when you must. Fight for the resources to create classrooms that meet, or come close to meeting, the 100/100 goal. The closer we come to achieving that goal, the closer we will be to providing what really matters for struggling readers.



